

Practice Management Nugget © Webinar Learning Guide

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Talk Like a Leader *How To Make Difficult Conversations a Win-Win*

1. We Don't Talk Anymore

Many years ago we were supposed to be living in "The Information Age" but there's no question there's more information available today than ever before. Most of that written information comes to us in digital form from emails, text messages, internet stories and blogs, social media and even good old printed newspapers and magazines. Unfortunately most people haven't realized that on many occasions when we send an email or text message, or write something on Facebook, we're doing something we used to communicate verbally. While we're writing more, we're talking less and it's becoming noticeable. People don't pick up the phone as much as they used to, or talk face to face to co-workers or clients because of technology. Compare the number of text messages a teenager sends to the number of phone calls they make. Have we reached the point where it's too easy to email or text, or to put it another way, is it too hard for us to talk?

2. Communication is About More Than Just Talking

When most people use the words "communications" or "communicating" they think they're just words that mean "talking". That's not the case. There actually are five distinct parts to communications. There must be a message, a sender for the message, a receiver for it, feedback and noise. Feedback is whatever way the sender can use to ensure the message has been understood, while noise is anything that distorts the message from either the sender or receiver.

3. It's Not All About You

One of my favourite lines from my *Talk Like a Leader* keynote presentation is "People won't care about how much you know until they know how much you care." So true. CEOs and other managers who think people will hang on their every word and act just because they tell them to are living in the past. Today's leaders need to build relationships with their employees, vendors and other stakeholders to fully open the lines of communication. A relationship doesn't have to be one that's gone on for years. It can be as simple as a manager and a co-worker connecting over a mutual hobby or the latest hot show on Netflix. Good communication is not about dominating every conversation - it's about caring what others think and say just as much as you want them to care about you and your opinions and comments.

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4. Be a Leader and Lead

While consensus building, feedback from others and open discussion are all great, eventually the time comes for leaders to make decisions. Employees may not like every decision the leader makes, but can take comfort that he/she listened to what everyone had to say, gave it some thought and make a tough decision. At times, difficult conversations need to be held and leaders are required to be honest with their workers about their performance and what needs to happen to improve. In times like this, honesty isn't the best policy - it's the only policy.

5. You Are What You Prepare For

It shouldn't come as any surprise that effective communicators are people who typically think about what they're going to say before they say it and even practice before some difficult conversations are held. Start by mapping out what you want to say and putting it down on paper in point form. Do it in your own handwriting because you'll remember it better. Then check your facts because there's nothing worse than being halfway through a difficult conversation and discovering your information was wrong. Think about potential objections from the person you will be speaking to and how you'll deal with their arguments and find ways to bring the conversation around to where you want it to go. Finally practice by saying the words out loud and recording your practice session with a cell phone or tablet. Take a look back and see what you look like and what improvements can be made.

6. Sweat the Small Stuff

When people communicate, either in a formal or an informal setting, there are some important things to remember. For obvious reasons it's always best to be yourself and be honest. Honesty is a very important trait for anyone; especially leaders so don't sugarcoat what you say. Simple, direct language is always the best. Although it's important to be clear and direct, it's also important to be positive and give people hope. Here's a good example of this. "John, I expect you to do better in sales than you have for the past six months, but I know you can do it. You've done it before and I'm confident you can do what's needed to bring your numbers up by 10% and make both yourself and the company more successful. There's no reason you shouldn't be able to hit our targets." Finally, document what was said. There's an old line about one dull pencil being sharper than six bright minds. An important discussion not documented may become dust in the wind.

7. Your Body Language is Just as Important as Your Words

It's great to spend time properly preparing for important conversations, but leaders who don't also consider the importance of their body language are spinning their wheels. Their body language needs to match what they're saying. If it doesn't, the message they're sending gets confused. People with dogs in the home understand that the tone of their voice and their body language is far more important than their actual words when talking to their pet. As you prepare for the discussion, consider what your body language is saying as well. Are you making good eye contact? Are you using hand gestures that align with what you're saying? Do you have good posture? Do you look relaxed or tense and nervous? Body language can be harder to correct than words, so take a hard look at what your body language is saying and work to make improvements. Remember your voice follows your body, not the reverse.

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8. Build a Communications Culture

Ask yourself what can be done to make your employees communicate better. First of all, think about how transparent your organization is and consider whether changes could make it more transparent.

Organizations that aren't transparent generally are ones that don't communicate very well. Look around and ask what can be done to get people to talk more and email and text less. In some cases people will need to be forced to open up, but your office will be better for it. Ask for suggestions from your team and remember that there are no bad ideas. Finally, do everything you can to eliminate the "us vs. them" mentality. Turf protection and workplace silos lead to communication problems, frustration and financial losses.

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